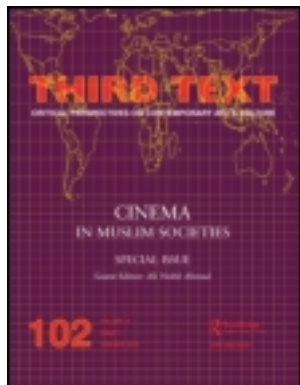


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Travelling 'Postcolonial' Allegories of Zion, Palestine and Exile

Ella Shohat

How does one write about a passionate writer whose words have energised campaigns to tell previously forbidden tales of abuse, humiliation and hope? And how does one memorialise a 'worldly' intellectual when the 'great man' genre itself is something that the sceptic in Edward Said would have found suspect? While Said's texts have travelled across many worlds, I will review their itineraries over the imagined geographies of Zion and Palestine: first as encapsulated in the narratives of exodus, diaspora and return; and second as echoed in the translation of postcolonial studies from English to Hebrew.

A throwing of a stone on the Lebanese–Israeli border had the collateral effect of exiling Said's lecture on Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* from Vienna to London, condemned, as it were, to follow in Freud's own footsteps. Many are the ironies entailed in this displacement, involving diverse exoduses, whether that of the Biblical tale and its Zionist invocation or of the Palestinian Nakba and the accumulated exiles-within-exiles in its wake. In *Freud and the Non-European*,¹ Said explores Freud's wrestling with the European and non-European geographies of Jewish identity, especially Freud's highlighting the beginnings of monotheism in Egypt for both Moses, the founder of Jewish identity, and Akhenaton, the founder of monotheism, were Egyptian. In the methodological vein of his book *Beginnings*, Said elaborates on this narrative of the unstable beginning of Jewish origins. In this hermeneutic *mise-en-abîme*, Said reads Freud's reading of Moses' identity as a manifestation of Freud's own ambivalent identity as a European Jew who like Moses is at once insider and outsider.

Said's reading conjures up the diasporic Palestinian narrative as itself historically intertwined with post-Enlightenment European–Jewish identity and sketches the ambivalent position of the Palestinian intellectual in the West as again both insider and outsider. Throughout his work, Said was intrigued by what Isaac Deutscher called the 'non-Jewish Jew',² often with an ear to the echoing effects between the diasporic Jew and Arab as Oriental-Semitic figures forced to interrogate and rewrite the lexicon of the world around them. Freud becomes a paradigm of the Jew who opts for universalisation – with all its limitations, contradictions and

1 Edward W Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, with an introduction by Christopher Bollas and a response by Jacqueline Rose, Verso, London, 2003

2 See Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, 1968

antinomies. Said favours Freud who 'opened out Jewish identity toward its non-European Jewish background',³ over another Viennese Jew and Freud's contemporary, the Zionist Theodor Herzl. 'Freud's meditation on the non-European from a Jewish point of view', Said writes, refuses 'to resolve identity into some of the nationalist or religious herds in which so many people want so desperately to run'. For Freud, as read by Said, Jewish identity cannot possibly be 'fully incorporated into one, and only one, Identity'.⁴

I find it fascinating, against this backdrop, to read Herzl's 1902 futuristic novel *Altneuland*, which details the metamorphosis of a miserable turn-of-the-century Palestine into a wonderful civilisational oasis of scientific progress and humanist tolerance only two decades later. Herzl, like Freud, revisits the Biblical Exodus but, unlike Freud, he enlists the Exodus tale in the service of a foundational nationalist narrative of a unified Jewish Identity. In the chapter entitled 'Passover', the first supper provides a pretext for relating the miraculous conversion of old into new, pronounced by the born-again Zionist character:

First we shall finish our Seder after the manner of our forefathers, and then we shall let the new era tell you how it was born. Once more there was an Egypt, and again a happy exodus – under twentieth century conditions... and with modern equipment. It could not have been otherwise. The age of machinery had to come first. The great nations had to grow mature enough for a colonial policy... We had to become new men, and yet remain loyal to our ancient race.⁵

Performed in the presence of approving Christian Europeans, this didactic allegory has the rejected Jew who mimics 'Europe' confidently joining 'Europe' but this time in the East. Herzl's desire for a modern repetition of the Biblical Exodus contains a double movement – not simply *out* of 'Egypt' but also *into* 'Canaan', the grounded Eastern topos paradoxically of his Western utopia. Both the inward and outward movements, however, potentially disrupt the axioms of this utopia. Known in Hebrew as *Yetziat Mizrayim* or the 'departure' from Egypt, Exodus also entails 'entering Egypt', as Genesis suggests that the Pharaoh initially welcomed Joseph's family. The Egyptian shelter could equally have inspired a narrative of the 'homing', as it were, of the displaced in Egypt. The Biblical Exodus, furthermore, manifests a teleological movement towards the Promised Land in which the escape from slavery is coupled with the conquest of Canaan, thus becoming a contested site between Zionist versus Palestinian readings.

Two decades prior to engaging with Freud's Moses, Said participated in a related debate over the inscription of the Biblical Exodus as a paradigmatic liberation narrative. In his review of Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution*, Said asked:

How can one exit Egypt for an already inhabited promised land, take that land over, exclude the natives from moral concern... kill or drive them out, and call the whole thing 'liberation'?⁶

Within this 'exodus politics', imagining a Canaanite perspective on the Israelite conquest, as Said does, subverts the reading of Exodus as simply a revolutionary utopia.

3 Said, op cit, p 44

4 Ibid, pp 53–4

5 Theodor Herzl, *Altneuland*, Hibrú publishing kompani, New York, 1914 or 1915. [*Old-New Land*, trans Paula Arnold, Haifa Publishing Co, Haifa, 1960.] For English, see: *Altneuland*, trans from German by Lotte Levensohn; with a new introduction by Jacques Kornberg, Markus Wiener, Princeton, NJ, 1997.

6 Edward Said, 'Michael Walzer's Exodus and Revolution: A Canaanite Reading', *Grand Street*, 5/2, Winter 1986, p 90

It is instructive to compare what might be called Said's Canaanite critique with the views pressed by the actual Canaanite (or *cna'anim*) intellectual movement in Israel prior to the establishment of the state, but leaving traces in texts by Amos Kenan, A B Yehoshua and Amos Oz.⁷ Grounded in the anti-exilic Zionist rupture with diasporic Judaism, the Cna'anim envisioned a harmonious future for all the inhabitants of the contested land to be guaranteed through a return to a Canaanite past. The Cna'anim sought to revive the ancient, pre-Judaic Hebraic culture, along with Canaanite, Assyrian, and other non-Monothestic myths and rituals. In contradistinction to the Judaic culture presumably corrupted by millennial exilic wandering, the Cna'anim believed in the teaching of Hebrew culture even to Palestinians. Thus, while drawing a romanticised genealogy traced back to vanished civilisations, the Cna'anim's archeological cultural project also filtered out the Arabised stratum of Palestine. Whereas the Cna'anim's digging into pre-biblical Hebraic origins reveals a Zionist anxiety about their own diasporic antecedents, Said's Canaanite reading uncovers the colonial substratum of the Zionist version of the Exodus narrative.

Seeing Said's work as a 'travelling theory' requires a sense of translation and mediation as ideas move into new contexts. In the case of Israel, the site of reception is a nation-state whose very foundation engendered massive dislocation, partly accountable for this specific intellectual's exile. And when this intellectual invokes the right of return to that same place – where a state is now endowed with the power not only to authorise or deny his return but also indirectly to oversee the arrival of his texts concerning displacement – then the question of this intellectual's 'out-of-placeness' becomes even more fraught. Indeed, Said's writing has encountered silencing, demonisation, misreading but also a measure of endorsement and legitimacy in Israel. I have examined elsewhere the Hebrew reception of Said, including the emerging field of post-Zionist studies, which attempts to insert itself into postcolonial studies, pointing to the rather tendentious framing of his work in such journals as *Teoria VeBikoret* (Theory and Criticism). I will here consider some of the conceptual aporias emerging from this cross-border movement between one institutional zone of political semantics and another.

Although Said was a staunch critic of the Oslo accords, it was ironically the Oslo era that facilitated the 'voyage' of his texts into Israel. The trickling out of the Anglo-American academic debates over the diverse 'posts' (postmodernism, poststructuralism, postnationalism and postcolonialism) made possible the marriage of still another 'post' with another 'ism': 'postzionism'. Since the second half of the 1990s, English-language postcolonial theory has travelled into Hebrew and 'landed' in a certain postzionist world to settle into a rather anomalous context. Postcolonial theory, and Said more specifically, were introduced to the Hebrew reader within an intellectual vacuum where both anti-colonial and postcolonial writings were concerned. The classical anti-colonial texts by Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Léopold Sédar Senghor or Roberto Fernández Retamar were never translated into Hebrew. Albert Memmi's books on Jewish-related questions had meanwhile been translated but not his anti-colonialist texts. Postcolonial discourse thus arrived in a space that had not engaged with the foundational anti-colonial corpus. For Israeli postcolonials who seem to have discovered and ventriloquised

7 See, Ella Shohat 'The "Postcolonial" in Translation: Reading Said in Hebrew', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Issue 131, Spring 2004

Fanon only via Homi Bhabha, or cast Bhabha as the subverter of the presumably binarist, static and hegemonic Said, the intellectual 'jump' into the 'post' becomes a magic carpet flying into the land of erasure.

In the US context, the terrain for Said's *Orientalism* had been prepared on the Left by a long series of struggles around civil rights, decolonisation, Third Worldism, Black Power and anti-imperialism. Postcolonial theory emerged out of the anti-colonialist moment and Third Worldist perspective; that is at least partly what makes it 'post'. But in Israel one finds a 'post' without its past. Postzionist-postcolonial writing – and this is one reason why the analogy between the two terms is problematic – comes out of an intellectual world untouched by the anti-colonialist debates. In the Third World, nationalism gave way to some 'course corrections' and a measure of disillusionment, which provided the affective backdrop for postcolonial theory – a backdrop that had no equivalent in the Israeli context.

The question of exactly when the 'post' in the 'postcolonial' begins has already provoked a debate in English.⁸ But to suggest a moving beyond 'the colonial' in a nation-state and in an academic space historically untouched by Third Worldism requires that we ask this question with greater vigour. In the first instance anti-colonial discourse gives way to postcolonial discourse, but in the second, it is not anti-Zionist discourse that gives way to post-Zionist discourse, but rather Zionist discourse that gives way to post-Zionist discourse. It is a curious case of the missing 'anti'.

Reading Zionism through the prism of colonialism has been taboo in Israeli academe. Given this context, one would think that the scholarly embrace of 'the postcolonial' would foreground the discussion of Zionism's relation to colonialism, as articulated for example in Said's *The Question of Palestine*. But instead one sometimes finds a kind of topsyturvy discourse, even when in political terms these same writers oppose the occupation. The editor of *Teoria evBikoret*, for example, criticises Said for viewing the Law of Return as racist and for not recognising that the Law of Return, like American 'affirmative action', was legislated as positive discrimination in favour of refugees and the persecuted.⁹ But this analogy is fallacious. US affirmative action was designed to compensate precisely those whom the nation-state had *itself* oppressed, those on whose backs the nation-state had been created, especially Native Americans and African-Americans. In Israel, in contrast, the Law of Return has compensated the very people who generated the dispossession. To ask Said to accept the Law of Return as a form of affirmative action for Jews misses the point – for Palestinians the Law of Return simply continues a history of dispossession. Israeli affirmative action for Palestinians has never been institutionalised and has often been caricatured, even in left publications, in terminology borrowed from the US Right, as a kind of obnoxious 'political correctness'.

Although postzionist-postcolonials have challenged certain Zionist orthodoxies, one wonders how post this 'post' is when terms borrowed from the alternative American lexicon ('affirmative action') surface in the Israeli context in the defence of the dominant ideology; and when the Palestinian desire for a right of return is repressed from the discussion; and when the relevance of the critique of the 'colonial' to the account of the 'Law of Return,' 'affirmative action' and the 'right of return' is

8 See Shohat, 'Notes on the 'Post-Colonial', *Social Text*, Spring 1992, pp 31–2

9 Shohat, op cit, 'The "Postcolonial" in Translation'

circumvented. As with the term 'postcolonialism', the prefix 'post' in 'post-Zionism' erases both colonial lineages and anti-colonial intellectual history with a magical stroke of the 'post'.

Within a post-Zionist perspective, Zionism ceases to constitute a relevant category, since the Israeli state has presumably reached a post-nationalist stage. The appeal of 'post-Zionism' derives precisely from a sense of opting out or bypassing the question of Zionism's relation to colonialism. Emerging in the 1990s, the term 'post-Zionism' suggested a premature eagerness to claim to have 'gone beyond' Zionism even while Zionist ideology exerted more power than ever both in Jerusalem and in Washington. 'Post-Zionism' also carries traces of the term 'postcolonial', then at its height of prestige in the Anglo-American academy, exactly at the time when the prefix 'post' was attached to 'Zionism'. The questions I have proposed elsewhere with regard to the spatio-temporal ambiguity of the term 'postcolonial'¹⁰ might equally be posed with regard to the term 'post-Zionism': that is, 'post' in relation to what, to where, to when and to whom? When exactly does the 'post' in 'post-Zionism' begin? And what kind of location and perspective does the term reflect? And what discourse does 'post-Zionism' go beyond? The 'beyond' of the 'post' in 'post-Zionism', unlike that in 'postcolonialism', takes us into a more complicated realm, precisely because the parallel between Zionism and colonialism remains sublimated. In the term 'post-colonial', it is the prefix 'post' that carries an ambiguous spatio-temporality, while the substantive 'colonial' remains a more or less agreed upon signifier and frame of reference. In the term 'post-Zionism', in contrast, it is both the prefix 'post' and the substantive 'Zionism' that are contested. It is especially the valence of what follows the hyphen in 'post-colonialism' and 'post-Zionism' that distinguishes the two fields of inquiry.

In a context where debates about debates travel between the US and Israel, Said's figure occupies a paradoxical site in relation to the 'postcolonial'. While wielding the powerful wand of American academe, and specifically of postcolonial studies, he is also a haunting exile from colonised Palestine. Said's own Janus-faced position forms part of the contradictory passing of his work through diverse checkpoints in Israel where some ideas have been expelled, some stamped with an entry visa and others smuggled in or forced to go underground. That Said's final resting place is in Broummana, Lebanon and not Jerusalem where he was born, not Egypt which he left, and not New York where he lived, provides a suitably inconclusive allegory to the equally ruptured voyages of his ideas across national borders.

10 Shohat, *op cit*, 'Notes on the "Post-Colonial"'

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